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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MYSTICISM AND
THE DIVINE IMMANENCE

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Recent studies in religious mysticism from the standpoint of psychology have netted, *inter alia*, the following contributions: (1) The conceptualization of divine reality, apprehended through the peculiar spiritual experience of the mystic, is based, not upon some aboriginal idea of deity, but upon the humanization of some sacred aspect of nature. (2) Mystical intuition is not a unique form of experience, but simply a way of experiencing which involves *more* of consciousness than is ordinarily exercised in plain matter of fact attention to the familiar object of the world. (3) The objectivity of God aroused as a postulate in the mind under the pressure of an intensified interest in, or concentration upon, the causal meaning of holy aspirations, is but the projection of the idealized self before the retina of the actual self as though it were a disparate entity independent of any necessary connection with consciousness. (4) The ideational aspects of the mystical *superself*, to which is attributed extraneous being, are such as denote social rather than individual qualities of life. And further (5), this subjective creation appears more intensely real (vital) or dynamic in its manifestations than the normal self, owing of course to the heightened form of the feelings and emotions out of which it is generated. In fine, the nature of the "unchartered reality," which makes itself *felt* in the excess of spiritual ecstasy, appears to overlap or transcend the natural bounds

which limit human nature and to elicit potentialities of perfection.¹

These conclusions bear upon the traditional claim of the mystic to experience God directly, and seemingly tend to a negation of the whole position. Certainly then they must be reckoned with, not simply in defense of the objective reality of God, but for the sake of clarifying our concepts of divine being. And it is especially important to examine this psychological ruling because the chief result of these scientific findings is to relegate to a sphere of second-rate interest the truth about the objective reality which underlies religious experience as a whole, and to emphasize exclusively the subjective reaction or interaction as the all-important factor in religion. The problem of what God is becomes accordingly negligible so far as the value and power of spiritual life is concerned. Indeed, a recent writer goes so far as to say, "Surely, in a study of religion, we need not be concerned with the objective reality behind the conceptual constructs of the religious consciousness."²

It is not the mystic only who may be said to protest against a dogmatic prohibition of this kind, but hosts of rationalistic thinkers are determined to bring the primary object of religious faith within the connotation of intelligent definition.³ Still, the psychological inquiry is entitled to a hearing and, in fact, should be recognized by both sides as making a contribution without which any substantial advance in theology would be permanently blocked. Let us ask then, what is the truth that has been uncovered? The answer may be put thus: the psychology of mysticism has not shown conclusively that there is an illusion in the mystic's apprehension of the "absolute

¹ Cf. John M. Mecklin, *The Revival of the Ontological Argument*. JPPsM, Vol. XIV, No. 5, pp. 124-135.

² A. A. Goldenweiser, *Religion and Society: A Critique of Emile Durkheim's Theory of the Origin and Nature of Religion*. JPPsM, Vol. XIV, No. 5, p. 117.

³ Cf. Durant Drake, *Seekers after God*, HTR, Vol. XII, No. 1, pp. 67-83.

other," but it has demonstrated the improbability of any direct knowledge of, or acquaintance with, a God *transcendent*. This is the primary contribution: there is no transcendent deity with whom communication is established in ways peculiar to mysticism. If it is insisted that there *may* be a transcendent God, nevertheless mysticism can not establish a guarantee. But though one may waive the suggestion of any transcendent reality in mystical experience, it is a *non sequitur* to infer that the mystic is under a delusion in regard to his at-one-ness with God; for, as a matter of course, this is exactly what the psychological analysis indicates, namely, that the personal object of religious experience is decidedly God *immanent*. In this paper I hope to make such a view tolerable to the psychologist.

My thesis may be stated negatively as follows: the sacred object of mystical contemplation is not *merely* the idealization of self-potentialities. *Potentia* connotes possibilities and powers, but not in unlimited degree; they function in proportion to a scale of existing actualities. For instance, the potentiality of the acorn is measured by the oak *and no more*; but the spiritual idealization postulated in mystical conceptualization involves *more* than can be measured by the self. It embodies a fullness of being which is immeasurable (infinite); or, to put it another way, this idealization connotes an expansive idea, the "fringes" of which transcend the possibilities of human experience. This "vision of God," which is perceived by means of the elasticity of consciousness and is wrongly identified exclusively with the self *and no other*, is not only an exhibition of superhuman potency but of human impotency as well. It is a manifestation of illimitable power, which, traced back to more elemental form, implies a spring of energies altogether out of proportion with the capacities of human nature. Since a search for fundamental reality is equivalent to the hunting down of the

elemental, it becomes simply a matter of logical economy to determine the most primary real whence all subsequent properties are derived. The ideational content of the God-idea then naturally presupposes energies which underlie their incomplete expression in consciousness. The truth of the matter is that the psychology of mysticism being dynamic, we are bound to trace the mystic's intellectual sensitiveness causally, and note that the God-concept is the effect of forces which certainly can not be measured in terms of the self alone. The conclusion would be that the idealized projection of the self witnesses to the drive, the push, the ardor or élan of the divine immanence. Why distort and corrupt elemental being, manifested in consciousness by that peculiar expansion of the self which is the experience of the mystic in acute forms and the common experience of the layman in less poignant or more blunted forms, by identifying the finite self with its infinite *superpotentiality* ?

Now the primary interest of religion is in origination, in contradistinction from the science of morality, which is based upon the *terrain* of "ends" or results, beneficial or detrimental to life. To be more specific, it is the interest in the *cause* of spiritual aspiration which determines the peculiar bent of the religious consciousness. Religious reflection, as is most conspicuously revealed in piety, is not the prophetic or forward vision; it is a contemplation of primary rather than ultimate (attractive) causation.⁴ It may be admitted though that so far as religion is taken to include morality it of course embraces the prophetic outlook as well. Still, the distinctive truth-seeing of the religious consciousness is bound to be immanent rather than transcendent (or teleological). The confusion involved in the notion of a transcendent deity is the failure to recognize the fact that the God-transcendent is unreal in the present; he is simply the God in the future, who

⁴ As a matter of fact *final* causation is anomalous in scientific investigation.

becomes, or rather is, immanent when experienced. Therefore we need feel no dismay because mysticism does not apprehend God transcendent, since it is impossible to reach *ahead of existence*. While time endures, all present anticipations of God are rightly attributed to God transcending existence, but wrongly attributed to a God who transcends now; which means, in other words, that the transcendent deity is the God of subsequent manifestation merely. The actual experience of the divine being must necessarily be confined to all that which is connoted by divine immanence. We are indebted then to the psychology of mysticism for pointing out the fact that immanence and transcendence are not correlative but progressive and continuous terms.

Let us consider in this light some of the aspects of mysticism which modern psychology accentuates, particularly those which have been mentioned in the beginning of this discussion. The denial of the aboriginal God-idea and the substitution of a humanized aspect of nature transfigured by the religious thrill, is not less than an admission of immanent potentiality superior to that of human personality. For it is patent that an immanent deity could only become an object of consciousness within the compass of consciousness itself, so that the "transfiguring" or "humanizing" of nature in itself need give rise to no denial of deity. The point is, why humanize and transfigure the natural perception? The answer is, because consciousness is struggling with an object of experience which forces or compels recognition in spite of the limitations of consciousness. It is not consciousness which idealizes or overmagnifies nature in terms of itself; it is the superabundance of energy within it which projects the self out into mystical idealization. Nothing shows more clearly the dynamic process which constitutes the nature of spirit.⁵ Thus the religious thrill reveals the

⁵ See my article, *The Nature of Spirit*, BW, Vol. LIII, No. 2, pp. 145-148.

weakness or subjection of consciousness in the control of superior energies.

Again the recognition of religious intuition as a whole experience rather than singular neural reactions or interactions does not make the God-postulate self-limited in reality, *i. e.*, elementally, since intuition at best is but partial and successive effects of a spiritual causality which is by no manner of means limited to the potentialities of the actual self. Not that consciousness is the subjective effect of *Dinge an sich* outside; there is no subjective frontier over which reality passes under a contraband form. It is true that the form of the God-concept will naturally be circumscribed by consciousness, but it does not follow that consciousness is a measure of the divine, since the conceptualizations are but passing effects of energies (spirit) whose origin is indeterminate and whose extension and scope are immeasurable. The spirit is like the wind, whose passing is *felt* but the whence and whither are indeterminate.

The generalized or social character of the mystical concept is in keeping with the tendency of spirit to expand and overpass the boundaries of individual selves, but the socialized self is not coterminous with immanent deity. It is, rather, another manifestation of spirit in the inevitable overflowing of personal life. Thus the individual who is constrained spiritually to idealize himself socially does so through a superior power.

Finally, the emotional accompaniment of the mystical concept testifies again to the dynamic character of the divine immanence as the all-pervasive creative elemental force, neutral in the non-conscious universe but qualified by spiritual significance in human nature. It is said that the excessive excitement and the enhanced emotion of religious ecstasy in its most pronounced forms is a stirring or stimulation of one's spirit within and a letting it go after some manner of *laisser-aller* spontaneity. This

sounds true enough; but what is interesting about it is the spiritual momentum itself, the involuntary tendency to increase when once started. Surely the spiritual life is not self-propelled⁶ ("By grace are ye saved . . . not of yourselves; it is the gift of God . . . lest any man should boast."). This is the essence of the mystery. And why then is it not interpreted correctly by the mystic who concludes that the soul is in the hand of *God*?

The gist of the foregoing argument may be restated thus: the "idealized self" is not *selbstverständlich*; it is an "other-than-rational" product, in which the mysteries of origin, cause, infinity, elemental reality, and the like are involved, notions which are not attributable to the creation of consciousness, since they can not be said to be experienced,⁷ *i.e.*, immediately. Why then hesitate to conclude that these *differentiæ* between the self and the *alter* constitute evidence of autogenetic personality whose only admissible meaning is God?

In closing this paper, one word more. The religious philosopher is under obligation to the psychologist for taking mysticism as an experience out of the realm of metaphor and symbolism and placing it in the domain of natural science. Not that sufficient progress has yet been made to satisfy true devotion; since, left to the tender mercies of natural science, the equation of the God-idea with an over-idealized self leaves wanting the nice point that mysticism has sought to emphasize, namely, the reality of God manifest through human conception; but when we translate divine transcendence (anticipated divinity) into terms of immanence, which should be done to counteract an immature analysis of elemental reality, as seen in

⁶ Now moral life is self-controlled. But morality and spirituality are distinguishable. Aristotle puts the whole matter in a nut-shell thus: life is determined to be indeterminate; which means, in this connection, that spiritual propulsion is deterministic and moral compulsion is indeterministic, or free. That is to say, religion constrains us to make moral decisions.

⁷ Hocking (The Meaning of God in Human Experience) notwithstanding.

the logical impatience of mystical imagination, the light of a new day will begin to break through the obscurities — not to mention the aridities and vacuities of mystical metaphysics — which have so long darkened the horizon of religious knowledge.